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ABSTRACT

During the 1960s, protest music was expressed primarily through the folk tradition: it was the most important medium of the counter culture. The folk music tradition of the 1960s found its roots in the music of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. In their music, commercial success and professional standards were militantly opposed. Folk music raised the consciousness of people, forcing them to examine their basic values and to think about social and political problems. Bob Dylan's music epitomized the generation gap. His songs expressed that blacks had waited long enough for freedom and dignity, that the counter culture was a force to be reckoned with, and that a peaceful yet dramatic revolution was going to occur. Joan Baez also had an enormous influence on sixties activists, as did Tom Paxton and Phil Ochs. Groups such as Crosby Stills, Nash and Young, and Simon and Garfunkel had a less threatening way of protesting. A number of San Francisco groups lived the counter culture as well as sang about it. By the end of the decade, however, protest music had declined along with student activism. Rock music, such as that performed by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones continued to register protest, but it was a protest "of form rather than substance." (Author/KC)

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SIXTIES PROTEST MUSIC:

The Key to Understanding the Counter Culture

"Never before in history had music meant so much to a generation", said Jerome Rodnitsky of the 1960's.[1] Music was the most important medium of the counter culture. It expressed the values of the movement as well as reflected the attitudes of protestors more than any other phenomena in that volatile decade. Film, television, books, paintings, plays and other media carried messages but none embodied and epitomized counter-culture values as much as music. The songs of the period inspired protest as well as registered concern about every important issue of the period from civil rights to the Vietnam War.

A debate rages over what type of music was most important in the sixties and which musician had the greatest impact on counter-culture values. Those who were "teeny-boppers" during the decade and those who lived in the major cities tend to argue rock music was the most important. The more mature members of the counter culture and those who lived in rural or small-town America will argue folk music had the greater influence. Actually it depends mainly on what part of the decade referred to. During the early sixties, protest music was expressed primarily via the folk tradition and by the end of the decade, rock was king. Music evolved during the decade along with the social and political climate. In the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, the gentle sounds of "Blowin' in the Wind" and "We Shall Overcome" expressed the non-violent aspirations of protest, and folk music was the ideal medium to convey these concerns. However, by the middle of the decade, the war in Vietnam and riots in American cities turned counter-culture music to what was called "folk-rock" music with a more militant tone such as heard in the "Eve of Destruction" by Barry McGuire. By the end of the decade, the violence abroad and at home and the cynicism and

frustration with what seemed to be the lack of social and political change within the system turned musical sounds to rock as exemplified by the Beatles' "Revolution".

Measured by record sales alone, the Beatles are the sixties. Their music changed the attitudes, values and life styles of millions of young people in this country as well as around the world. But within the counter-culture movement itself, Bob Dylan was considered king. His music never had the widespread acceptance Beatles' music did but that is precisely why he is the most important figure of the period. Protest music seldom made the "Top Ten" charts because the counter culture was never embraced by the majority of youth in this country. Richard Cole of the University of North Carolina did a study of the sixties' music found on top ten charts which clearly showed not protest but "love-sex was the predominant theme throughout the ten years".[2] Many youths adopted parts of the counter culture but few became "true believers" or anything but "weekend hippies". Those who did fully embrace the values of the counter culture tended to follow Dylan.

The folk music tradition of the sixties grew out of the music of such legends as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. It can be broadly defined as message music where the lyrics were more important than the sound. Guthrie's music grew out of the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War. His songs told a story usually handed down from generation to generation although he also wrote tunes of his own. The hallmarks of his music as well as Seeger's were the simple life, rural values, and social concern. Commercial success and professional standards were not only ignored, but militantly opposed. As one of the "folkies" of the period, Tom Rush, put it:

> We were traditional music devotees, purists.
> If we were to sing it had to be handed down
> father to son via oral tradition, with

> Woody Guthrie's music being the only exception. The watchwords were "ethnic" and "commercial" which were synonymous with "good" and "bad". Leadbelly was "ethnic"; the Kingston Trio were "commercial".[3]

Joni Mitchell summed it all up in "Woodstock" - it was time to get back to the garden, back to the basics. The counter culture was disenchanted with middle-class materialism - "God, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz!" (Janis Joplin). There was a revolt against the impersonalization of IBM-card bureaucracy, the alienation of suburban insensitivity and the rat race for two cars in every garage. Tom Rush said, "we were embarrassed by the discrepancies between the music we adopted, the music of the poor and illiterate, and our parents' swimming pools...."[4] The Silent Majority was also embarrassed by the protest music. For example, the embarrassment led television censors to try to keep the air waves as American as apple pie. In 1963, Pete Seeger was not allowed to sing on ABC's "Hootenanny" because of his conviction for being in contempt of HUAC in 1955. CBS censored Bob Dylan that same year because he wanted to sing "Talkin' John Birch Society Blues" on the Ed Sullivan Show. Before the end of the decade, "The Smothers Brothers Show" was cancelled for its un-Americanism! But Pete Seeger would not be silenced and in 1967 wrote probably the best known attack on the Vietnam War titled "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy":

> It was back in nine-teen forty two,
> I was part of a good platoon.
> We were on maneuvers in a Looziana,
> One night by the light of the moon.
> The captain told us to ford a river, and
> that's how it all begun. We were knee
> deep in the Big Muddy but the big fool
> said to push on.
>
> (3rd Verse)
>
> The sargeant said, "Sir, with all this
> equipment,
> No man will be able to swim."

"Sergeant, don't be a nervous nellie,"
The Captain said to him,
"All we need is a little determination;
Men, follow me, I'll lead on."
We were neck deep in the Big Muddy
and the big fools said to push on. [he drowned]

(6th Verse)

Well, maybe you'd rather not draw any moral;
I'll leave that to yourself.
Maybe you're still walking and you're still talking
And you'd like to keep your health.
But every time I read the papers
That old feeling comes on;
We're waist deep in the Big Sandy and
the Big Fool says to push on.

Folk music raised the level of consciousness of people, making them more aware of the evils of white racism and the Vietnam War. It's this impact on the social conscience that makes folk music more important than rock music. Folk appealed to the brains; rock to one's guts. Folk turned people outward; rock turned people inward. As Professor William O'Neill of Columbia has said, "rock as an idiom was more concerned with social and sexual freedom than politics".[5] Rock paved the way for the mindless, sensual narcissism of the "disco seventies". It was an escape from the political and social realities of the era. Michael Bloomfield insisted "to the folk community, rock and roll was greasers, heads, dancers, people who got drunk and boogied."[6] Folk made people examine their basic values and forced a generation to think about social and political problems. It took people back to the simple life because as Bob Dylan put it, "when you got nothing, you got nothing to lose"; or as Janis Joplin sang, "freedom's just another word for nothing else to lose". As one writer concluded, "the affecting of rural clothing, the addition of ideological messages to folk tunes, and the use of rural jargon by middle-class dropouts and intellectuals are all aspects of this phenomena".[7]

Sixties' counter-culture music also owed quite a debt to black music. In

the fifties, and before, black musicians had been experimenting with new forms, new freedoms, new sounds of music, long before whites. It was partly their escape from white racism. They had been fighting WASP America for a long time and were counter-culture before there was such a term. Chuck Berry and others paved the way for Elvis Presley who in turn paved the way for the Beatles. Black music reflected a life style exemplified by unique clothing, street language and freedom of musical form. Just as the Civil Rights Movement paved the way for the Student Movement of the Sixties, black music opened the door for white musicians.

One black artist of the period who has been generally ignored but had the greatest impact on me of anyone was Roberta Flack. She was not known as a protest singer but listen carefully to her "Business Goes on as Usual". The message is clear as in all her music; but one felt the agony of racism and war; the frustration of poverty and dispair; the anguish of alienation and insensitivity. The lyrics are still more important than the sound of her music but the way she interpreted lyrics added a new dimension to their meaning. She reminds me of the student who answered my request for a definition of "soul", during a deep theological discussion in one of my classes, with the emphatic, "Soul is the Commodores". Roberta was soul.

Many singers of the period came across cold and insensitive but Roberta put such deep feeling into her music that one <u>experienced</u> what she was saying. She cried out from the depths of her soul for racial justice, personal dignity and human sensitivity. If there was a "Consciousness III", the heart of the new value system was sensitivity - caring for people, their problems, their hells, their dreams, their dignity. In Roberta's music, one could feel the pain caused by bigotry, whether towards blacks, white sharecroppers, Vietnamese or even the long-haired hippies who suddenly became the target of blind hatred in the sixties.

I well remember an experience of my own in the late sixties when I was participating in a peace demonstration, and I learned the hard way how experiencing bigotry gave one a better understanding of it. Like experiencing Roberta Flack's music, I got the opportunity to skim the surface and get a glimpse of what blacks had undergone for hundreds of years - the blind hatred of bigotry. That's not to claim any white can ever really know what it's like to be black in this country but a white can experience bigotry. There seemed to be an exceptional number of hecklers during this particular demonstration and one big, middle-aged white man with a crew-cut came rushing at me shouting obscenities. He was not confronting me on my politics nor my right to protest, nor even the question of the morality of the Vietnam War, he was furious at my long hair and the clothing I wore. And when he got close enough, he spat into my face screaming, "you dirty hippie". Suddenly it dawned upon me that blacks had been victims of that same blind hatred all their lives.... With Roberta Flack's music, you <u>experienced</u> what the counter culture was all about.

Bob Dylan knew that experience all too well. He participated in the early civil rights demonstrations long before he became famous. His "Blowin' in the Wind" reflected his experiences and became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement in the early sixties. It is interesting to note that Peter, Paul and Mary took that tune to the top of the charts in 1962 and few knew what the lyrics were about! Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota in 1941. He ran away from home at ages 10, 12, 13, 15, 15-1/2, 17 and 18 and claimed he was "caught an' brought back all but once".[8] In the early sixties he came to the Greenwich Village in New York City, guitar in hand, to become another Woody Guthrie. Rodnitsky concluded: "Woody Guthrie did it the earliest and most convincingly, Pete Seeger did it the longest, Joan Baez did it most artfully, Phil Ochs tried the hardest, and the young Bob Dylan did it the best".[9]

Dylan epitomized the "generation gap". Al Kooper, who played with Dylan's band for awhile, put it this way:

> I...quickly discovered that if I played
> a Bob Dylan album too loud, it would
> bring my mother storming into the room
> in exactly twelve seconds. 'Who is that?
> That's terrible. It sounds like a
> fingernail on a blackboard'.[10]

Dylan's music expresses the ideals of the counter culture to the chagrin of many a parent. "Blowin' in the Wind" said loud and clear that blacks had waited long enough for equal rights and human dignity. It was an idea whose time had come. "How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?" "The Times They Are A-Changin'" announced in no uncertain terms that the counter-culture movement was a force to be dealt with and prophesied a peaceful, yet dramatic revolution. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall", written during the Cuban Missile crisis, warned of the suicide nature of nuclear war:

> I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'
> I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,
> Where the people are many and their hands are all
> empty,
> Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters,
> Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty
> prison,
> Where the executioner's face is always well hidden,
> Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten,
> Where black is the color, where none is the number....

The irony of Dylan's career is that no sooner had he "arrived" at the top of the protest music field, than he decided he didn't like the role. Late in 1963, Dylan was given the Thomas Paine Award for his work in the Civil Rights Movement by the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. In his acceptance speech, he announced his departure from socio/political activism:

> They talk about Negroes and they talk about
> black and white.... Man, I just don't see
> any colors at all when I look out....

> There's no black and white, left or right,
> to me any more. There's only up and down,
> and down is very close to the ground. And
> I'm trying to go up without thinking of
> anything trivial, such as politics".[11]

Dylan felt his musical talent limited by political activism and he also felt himself limited as a human being always having to live up to an image. Some of his later music certainly contained protest and social comment, but his music went through various changes in the mid-sixties.

In 1965, Dylan infuriated his devoted flock of followers in his Forest Hills (N.Y.) Concert by "going electric". It was only one of many musical experiments which alienated his fans, but Dylan was his own man and refused to conform for the sake of ideology. "Don't follow leaders", Bob once wrote, "watch parking meters". Like so many after the mid-sixties, Dylan grew cynical about social change. By 1968, he would say in the documentary film about himself, Don't Look Back: "I don't see anything to believe in". Joni Mitchell would describe the same disallusionment Dylan experienced:

> So many things I would have done,
> but clouds got in my way.
> I've looked at clouds from both sides now,
> from up and down and still somehow,
> It's cloud's illusions I recall.
> I really don't know clouds at all.

In spite of his cynicism (or perhaps because of it), Dylan remained the counter-culture's guru. Perhaps the debate over who had the more influence, Bob Dylan or the Beatles, will go on forever, but in my mind, it was Dylan. Scaduto summed it up this way:

> It was an irony. If Bob Dylan had sold out
> by leaving protest behind and moving into
> rock and lyrical introspection, the sellout
> had a reverse effect. In extending his
> audience, and in demonstrating to other
> musicians and writers that popular music
> did not have to be senseless pap, Dylan
> proved that "the times they are a'changin'".[12]

One folk singer who did not forsake activism was Dylan's one-time lover and early "sidekick", Joan Baez. She marched with Dylan in the civil rights protests of the early sixties and sang with him in several concerts. But unlike Dylan, Baez "grew up with the decade".[13] In the early sixties, she tilted the windmills of the Civil Rights crusade and marched in ban-the-bomb demonstrations. As the war in Vietnam escalated, so did her militancy, even refusing to pay taxes to support the war effort. By the end of the decade, she had married a "draft dodger". After her husband, David Harris, was imprisoned, her singing became more assertive and defiant as well as her life style. Although she never became as popular as Dylan, the quality of her voice and her determination to fight for counter-culture values had an enormous influence on sixties activists.

Two more folksingers who refused to forsake their political beliefs were Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton. They seemed to fill the void in protest music in the mid-sixties left by Dylan's exit. Among folk singers, they represented the militant or radical opposition to the Vietnam War. Paxton wrote "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation":

> I got a letter from LBJ, it said,
> 'This is your lucky day.
> It's time to put your khaki trousers on.
> 'Though it may seem very queer,
> We've got no jobs to give you here,
> So we are sending you to Vietnam'.

In 1962, Phil Ochs dropped out of college, like so many other protest singers, and joined his idol, Bob Dylan, in the village singing folk music. He was critical of racism in "Talking Birmingham Jam" as well as traditional politics in "Love Me, I'm a Liberal". He didn't just sing protest songs but actively participated in demonstrations, even joining Kentucky coal miners in a strike in Hazard. In 1966, he wrote "Cops of the World":

> When we've butchered your sons, boys,
> When we've butchered your sons;

Have a stick of gum, boys
Have a stick of gum.
We own half the world, oh say can you see,
And the name of our profits is democracy.

Bob Dylan, who had a parting of the ways with Ochs, remarked on one occasion, "You're not a folksinger; you're a journalist". Indeed he was both; but as the decade went sour with the violence of the late sixties, so did Ochs, eventually committing suicide - like so many others of the period. I am reminded of Allen Ginsberg's lament, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...."

But in the midst of the violence of the late sixties, Stephen Stills wrote:

What a field day for the beat
A thousand people in the street
Singin' songs and a-carryin' signs
Mostly say: Hooray for our side
I think it's time we
STOP
Children, what's that sound?
Everybody look what's goin' down.

Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young did stop and write protest music about what went down. "Teach Your Children" and "For What's It's Worth" exemplified a different type of protest song. They, along with Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel had a more soft, less threatening way of protesting than Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton. They wrote about the lack of communication, the abundance of alienation, and the frustration of insecurity in the late sixties. One of Simon and Garfunkel's most powerful protest pieces was a lament for a freedom rider killed by an angry mob in the sixties ("He Was My Brother"). They are best known for the music in "The Graduate" such as "Mrs. Robinson" and "The Sounds of Silence"; although most listeners failed to realize such songs as "Scarborough Fair" had subtle lines of protest: "A General's Order - They send us to kill, and to fight for a cause they have long ago forgotten."

By the late sixties, the protest music scene had pretty much shifted from the East Coast to the West Coast. The sound was louder, but the protest remained. Folk music declined in the late sixties just as nonviolent protest gave way to

violence. As one artist of the period has put it: "Electricity tore the folk tradition to bloody shreds; its slender wires weren't strong enough to handle the current".[14] Janis Joplin became one of the more powerful protest singers, but most of the San Francisco sound came from groups such as The Grateful Dead; Jefferson Airplane (now "Starship"); and Country Joe (McDonald) and the Fish with "Fixin' to Die Rag" (1968):

> Well come on all of you big strong men
> Uncle Sam needs your help again,
> He's got himself in a terrible jam
> Way down yonder in Vietnam,
> So put down your books and pick up a gun,
> We're gonna have a lot of fun.
> And it's one, two, three what are we fighting for,
> Don't ask me I don't give a damn,
> Next stop is Vietnam.
> And it's five, six, seven, open up the pearly gates.
> Well, there ain't no time to wonder why,
> Whoopee we're all gonna die.

Most of the groups in San Francisco lived the counter culture as well as sang about it. For example, the Jefferson Airplane not only rehearsed and worked together, but lived communally in Haight-Ashbury. As one of the members put it, "It was a family thing. No tourists. Everybody <u>did</u> live together and <u>did</u> help each other out".[15] The togetherness and sense of community was perhaps best exhibited at the concert "Woodstock" but peace and love were just terms for many musicians in the decade. Pete Seeger expressed the developments with the following words:

> History shows that there is a hidden heritage of militancy which comes and goes, but never completely dies. It undergoes transformations and permutations from century to century, but the lessons learned by one generation, even though in defeat, are passed on to the next".[16]

By the end of the decade, protest music was dying a slow death; if not dead. Rock n' roll and disco music came to characterize the seventies. The decline of protest music paralleled the decline of the student activism in the late sixties, early seventies. The killing of four students at Kent State

in 1970 seemed to spell the end for both political activism and protest music as Neil Young expressed it in his song, "Ohio";

> Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming....
> This summer I hear the drumming....
> Four dead in Ohio.
> Four dead in Ohio.

Perhaps Theo Bikel observed correctly that "the protest song movement...had been shattered on the realities of American politics".[17]

Rock music did continue to register protest, but as one writer remarked, it was "protest of form rather than substance. The music itself was sexual, highly creative, nonconformist, and clearly outside the idiom of white middle-class America".[18] Perhaps the two groups that most exemplified the new art form called "rock" were the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In 1964, the Beatles took New York by storm and America has never been the same since. The Beatles seemed to epitomize Dylan's dream of remaining "forever young". Their music emphasized magic and innocence which cried out for love, peace and brotherhood - central themes of the counter-culture movement. They never seemed to lose their optimism. Perhaps their most powerful protest song was "Revolution". Their chant "All we are saying is give peace a chance..." became the anthem of the Peace Movement. Their music evolved with the decade from simple lyrics to Oriental mysticism to drugs to violence. However, by the end of the decade, the Beatles had broken up and John Lennon wrote;

> I was the walrus,
> But now I'm John.
> And so dear friends,
> You just have to carry on.
> The dream is over.

Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring was received with rioting and the music of the Rolling Stones often inspired the same reaction. Perhaps it sounds far-fetched to compare Mick Jagger to Stravinsky, but audience reaction was similar because the music and performances were revolutionary.[19] Mick Jagger took the group to the top of the charts in 1965 with "Satisfaction" which held the #1

spot for six weeks! It may be difficult to understand how "Satisfaction" was a protest song, but it was a double entendre assaulting every conceivable traditional WASP value from sexual hang-ups to the lack of social change. Their music has been described as "gutsy, aggressive, sensual, economical, honest".[20] They advocated revolution by the very way they performed as well as the lyrics they sang. They also seemed to have outlived the rest; as Dickstein had said, "the Stones have survived drug busts, the death of guitarist Brian Jones, the unpredictable antics of Mick Jagger, and the negative apocalypse of the Altamont concert".[21] Altamont exemplified the deterioration of protest music by the end of the decade to the violence which was not found at Woodstock.

By the early seventies, it was all over. The protest movement itself was all but dead and music left the cerebral for the sensual. A protest song appears every now and then, but by and large, it has been replaced by "disco" or escapist music. The reason the movement died is a story in and of itself: however, Rodnitsky has concluded that "folk music was ridiculed by many alienated artists who felt that politics was sin and involvement was hopeless".[22] The Eagles said it all in "Hotel California": "We ain't had that spirit here since 1969...." That spirit is nowhere exemplified better than in the most important protest song of the decade: Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'":

> Come gather around people, wherever you roam,
> And admit that the waters around you have grown,
> And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone.
> If your time to you is worth savin'
> Then you'd better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone,
> For the times they are a'changin'.

SIXTIES PROTEST MUSIC:
The Key to Understanding the Counter Culture

FOOTNOTES

1. Jerome L. Rodnitsky, Minstrels of the Dawn (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), p. ix.

2. Richard Cole, "Top Songs in the Sixties: A Content Analysis of Popular Lyrics, "Mass Communication and Youth, ed. by F. Gerald Kline and Peter Clark (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1971), p. 95.

3. Tom Rush, "How Success Spoiled the Folkies," The Sixties, ed. by Linda Obst (New York: Random House/Rolling Stone Publication, 1977) p. 122.

4. Ibid., p. 123.

5. William O'Neill, Coming Apart (New York: Quadrangle, 1971), p. 243.

6. Michael Bloomfield, "Dylan Goes Electric," The Sixties, p. 150.

7. R. Serge Denisoff, "Folk Music and the American Left," The Sound of Social Change, ed. by R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), p. 107.

8. Time (May 31, 1963), p. 40.

9. Rodnitsky, inside cover.

10. Al Kooper and Ben Edwards, Backstage Passes (New York: Stein & Day, 1977), p. 49.

11. Anthony Scaduto, Bob Dylan (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 189.

12. Ibid., p. 259.

13. Rodnitsky, p. 123.

14. Al Kooper and Ben Edwards, pp. 60-61.

15. Jerry Hopkins, The Rock Story (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 93.

16. Sing Out! Vol. 15 (May 1965), p. 31.

17. Broadside, Vol. 87 (December 1967), p. 12.

18. Rodnitsky, p. 21.

19. Morris Dickstein, Gates of Eden (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 190.

20. Hopkins, p. 79.

21. Dickstein, p. 202.

22. Rodnitsky, p. 142.